

Empathy Surveillance As A Way To Begin To Regain Access To Yourself

By David Ian Bellows/Griess

I must first see myself for who I am to accept myself. Then I can begin again. After many years of self reflection, I am ready to pursue a more authentic path. A path that I have created for myself. A path in life that is genuine and aligned with my personal interests. A structure that is not just an escape but one that is caring, collaborative, and constructive.

My mother tried to get me to keep a diary once. As a child, I had a lot of pent up emotion and energy. I struggled with processing the “real world” and as a result, I had a hard time placing myself in it. At the time, I was too young to appreciate or comprehend the idea of being able to record and review the thoughts in my mind and the feelings in my body. Time spent existing in the world changes that. An ongoing internal dialogue is necessary for personal growth.

Growing up, my grandfather Vern recorded our family’s get-togethers as well as his own sketches and mock interviews with himself. He loved late night talk shows. The collective diary is a private archive amassed inside a closet filled with VHS tapes. The ability to see that archive physically amass changed my life, and in a lot of ways I have emulated Vern. I am quiet and introspective, but I can just as easily become the center of attention by telling a joke completely out of the blue. I value silence and conversation equally. I am passionate about what I do, and I am eager for the opportunity to share my creative output.

I began recording myself and the world around me with VHS tapes in high school. Technology has changed since then and for the past six years, I have been a member of archive.org. I have been using their digital platform to create a public archive that can be shared and made available as widely as possible. The subject matter is often personal, non-linear

narratives, and fragmented montages. I call the way I make work “diy (do it yourself) surveillance.” I use digital, tape, and film to record the content and then I digitize the footage once I am finished. The archive resembles a how-to manual by giving people examples of my experiences, perhaps they might create their own personal archive. In this way, I am also able to continue to critique the non-consensual mass surveillance that continues to shape our reality each day.

For the past six years, I have also been part of a performance art community here in New York. [Panoply Performance Laboratory](#) has been my go-to spot to keep me connected to what is happening in the community. The space was a two car garage at one time and then became multiple venues as it changed hands through different groups of people over the past 15 years. This year marks the end of a seven year run of the stageless living space / venue known as PPL. PPL usually had at least one or more open calls a year where anyone could submit a proposal in response to a list of prompts provided by an appointed committee and presented by [Performancy Forum](#)/BIPAF (Brooklyn International Performance Art Foundation).

[CIVIC REFLEX/REFLEJO CÍVICO](#) was one of the open calls and reads as follows:

“PERFORMANCY FORUM: CIVIC REFLEX is a collective performance/social art project involving: 1) the formation of a self-reflexive collective of 20 artists/groups 2) a series of 5 public forum events and 3) an online blog substantiating and framing “civic” “civil” and “reflexive” performance practices and performative theoretics. PERFORMANCY FORUM: REFLEJO CÍVICO es un colectivo de arte social y performance que consiste en: 1) la creación de un colectivo de 20 artistas/grupos que se comporte de manera auto-reflexiva 2) una serie de 5 eventos/foros abiertos al público 3) un blog online dedicado a proveer contexto y enmarcar teóricamente prácticas de arte performático, civil, cívico y auto-reflexivo.”

For my proposal, I chose to reflect on “empathy surveillance”, a term I came up with. In addition to creating a performance at PPL, I wanted to spend the year examining and excavating my everyday life, including my privilege, through the methods of diy surveillance. The idea was to process and place myself within a system that is not built on compassion as a way to output my gender dysphoria, breaking it apart to empower myself. Empathy surveillance became my way of creating diary entries. A series of videos (empathy) and text (surveillance) that I would upload to my archive.org page. Each entry became a fragment that could be viewed and read as a stand alone work but also as a piece of a larger narrative, just like the VHS tapes meticulously labeled and cataloged in Vern’s closet. One of the key differences between my archive.org uploads and those VHS tapes is that with the archive you can search between the fragments of information and data easily. You do not need to sift through each tape to find what you are looking for. Thanks to the use of certain phrases, tags, and metadata on archive.org, the viewer can click through each entry to discover more of the work without spending time rewinding or fast forwarding to find the correct section of tape from what is handwritten on the label.

[Topic \(tag\): empathy surveillance](#)

People have a need to share what they are thinking and feeling. Home movies were originally intended to be shown to family members and friends, a way to tell someone about an experience by showing them a video. With VHS cameras, the setting is often domestic. Due to short battery life, the camera is often tethered by an electrical power cord from the camera to an outlet. Now, with digital video and smart phones with longer battery life, storytelling can take place almost anywhere.

For there to be empathy something needs to be shared. The death of a loved one is something that everyone will experience at some point in their life. Regardless of the different circumstances and socio-economic factors, grief and loss still remain.

Uploaded by [david ian bellows/griess](#) on July 1, 2018

[surveillance07](#) (excerpt):

the second time i saw what was once a human person's body was at a funeral home, my uncle had passed away in his sleep one evening with no conclusive reason as to why. my family requested a private viewing before the body was to be cremated, as i looked down at the table i turned my head from one side to the other, i took out one of the business cards my uncle had made for himself and i gently tucked it in the left breast pocket of a button up shirt that dressed the body, i was in the room by myself, as i turned to walk back through the threshold of the door my legs started to shake and give way. from what i can remember i was caught by family members under both of my arms before i hit the ground.

Each surveillance became extremely candid, often times playing back a series of actions or thoughts, a reflection on things or events that have shaped the structure of how I view my life.

Uploaded by [david ian bellows/griess](#) on April 16, 2018

[surveillance07](#) (excerpt):

when i first consciously fragmented my body i tried to find a way to express ideas about identity or a lack thereof, i first explored what i knew through photos, text, and video, fragmented-body became a way to process emotions held internal, outside, and around the body, i explored the tension between suddenly giving up or losing everything external of the body (shelter / food / material possessions / relationships with inorganic /

organic objects) and repetitive generation and consumption carried out by the body, i was penetrated by a dildo suction cupped to the screen of a crt tv turned on with static played back on the monitor, i inserted and ejected gummi bears or whipped cream through the rectum, through acts/scenes like these, i attempted to allude to the physicality and the resilience of the body and what might be possible/impossible for the body to sustain.

People have a need to share what they are thinking and feeling. Home movies were one outlet to provide that, but now non-consensual surveillance has entered our homes and lives on such a mass scale that it is commonplace to be monitored nearly all the time in some shape or form. When you surf the internet or data is being monitored and tracked. When someone scrolls through social media and are watching and liking content. When you leave the house you are being filmed from multiple angles by multiple entities and institutions, both public and private. While some of these actions seem benign or harmless, others are creating serious questions about commodification, access, and usage of information. By shifting surveillance back onto myself, I am attempting to shift the gaze of a capitalist structure to a consensual exchange of information.

Uploaded by [david ian bellows/griess](#) on March 30, 2018

[surveillance02](#) (excerpt):

i think about one of Bob Flanagan's unrealized works often, i read about the work a few years ago in a book about performance art. the way i understood the work was that after Bob passed away Bob's body would be placed in a chamber or coffin underneath the floor of an art gallery, a video camera would be fixed on the body inside the chamber or coffin, a tv monitor and a chair would be placed above ground in the gallery, the video

camera would feed from the chamber or coffin to the tv monitor, a viewer could sit in the chair and watch the body decompose on the tv screen.

cleogirl2525 watches me through the phone screen as i broadcast myself on elizabethalamb's account, i am lying on the sofa, my entire body stretches across the cushions, the black platform heels i am wearing push gently into the pillow that rests against the arm of the sofa, dog mask, black knit crop top, black briefs, strap on with remote control, black rubber gloves, and black thigh high stockings (with lace patterning at the top and a rose pattern along the back), a tv monitor on the floor plays video of a metal pipe with black tubing coiled around the base of the pipe, the pipe is located on a roof across from the apartment i am lying in and can be seen when you look out the bathroom window, outside rain is pouring and pools of water collect on the roof near the pipe, the tv monitor volume is set to 0. the broadcast lasts for approximately 17 minutes. cleogirl2525 later tells me in an email that "I tuned in for as long as I could." i proceed to explain to cleogirl2525 what was playing back on the tv monitor during the broadcast.

cleogirl2525 watches me through the phone screen again, this time i broadcast myself against a wall full of electronic cords and adapters (RCA, VGA, USB, audio, etc.) dog mask, chain and leather choker body harness, oversized black leather jacket, black rubber gloves, black thong, black tights, and strap on with remote control, i stand in front of the phone's camera, i turn a clip lamp on and off. i move the clip lamp up and down my body, i pause and focus the light on my face, i focus the light towards the phone's camera, i turn my back to the phone's camera, i remove the oversized black leather jacket and sling the jacket over my back, i face the phone's camera, i end the broadcast.

2 viewers. cleogirl2525 sends another screenshot and states that there are more screenshots available if i would like them.

By publicly sharing personal content, we make ourselves vulnerable. Vulnerability can be unsafe due to the possibility of violence. Being vulnerable can also be a way for others to see what is inside of us, which can be extremely empowering. Vulnerability through a public personal archive also creates a way to connect in a deeper more meaningful way then just clicking a thumbs up button.

Uploaded by [david ian bellows/griess](#) on April 16, 2018
[surveillance05](#):

i wake up most days with anxiety to go work, in order to slow my spiral i do a scene, i roll out of bed when it is dark out. a scene before work is brief, if i wake up late i will fantasize about a potential or previous scene as i rush to get out the door. i mount the camera to the ceiling of the apartment, i want to record the way the room sees me from above, i want to record the way the buildings in the city see me from above, the ceilings in the apartment are not high enough, i want to record the way the people inside the building i work at see me from their control room, a version of me. platform performance, run underground, swipe, run further underground, across platforms. the platform monitor becomes a marker to stand underneath, fragmented-body, the camera captures you on the platform as you wait, the yellow warning stripe becomes a runway, step away from the edge of the platform, a failing infrastructure that is being monitored 24/7. you wait, the camera records. repetitive labor is broken apart by trips to the bathroom or a ride in the elevator, for an extended break, a walk up to the second floor to walk around the building, i count a dozen cameras on the first floor alone, all in the air. above my head, the cameras are looking in various directions, an entryway, 3 corridors, and a loading

dock, my movements captured from multiple angles. i drink more water to take another bathroom break. i stare at the blue cutting mat on the desk, my hands in blue rubber latex gloves, a sharp pain in my right thumb, there are times my hands and wrists swell, squeeze to load, the manual stapler secures the cardboard, mental gymnastics and stacks of product waiting to be packed, my POV* surveys the scene, a pan or a gentle tilt, i stand on a 3 x 4 foot rubber mat. i keep myself occupied during labor by playing back video in my head, a bookshelf in my brain full of video loops, play, pause, fast forward, and rewind, there is footage missing, time passes.

*point of view

After three years at my current job, I am still uncomfortable with dressing the way I want to be seen. To be vulnerable with others creates a way for connection. Censorship through shame and punishment is as prevalent as surveillance in our society. The themes within surveillance and censorship are often very similar and at times nearly identical. *This will keep you and an ambiguous and undefined community safe from the monsters and from ever becoming one yourself "ie" won't somebody think of the children!*

Uploaded by [david ian bellows/griess](#) on April 1, 2018

[surveillance03](#)

Frankenstein is not Frankenstein... rather; Doctor Frankenstein's monster. Doctor Frankenstein's monster was shortened at some point and Frankenstein became the monster's default name, the monster was popularized in the 1931 black and white film. Frankenstein was portrayed by Boris Karloff, a Universal Monster™, broad sloped forehead, distinct facial scars, with silver bolts protruding the sides of its neck, a monster made up of grafted cadaver parts, brought to life with electricity, once in color, the monster's pale green skin becomes another distinct feature, making the character

hanging off the wall in the antique store, instantly recognizable.

Mary Shelley's original novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) paints a different picture of how Doctor Frankenstein's monster came to be. in the novel Doctor Frankenstein uses raw materials from "the dissecting room and the slaughterhouse" ¹ , void of electricity, Shelly's character "had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing life into an inanimate body." ²

¹ *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley, 1818, pg. 47

<https://archive.org/stream/Frankenstein1818Edition/frank-a5#page/n55/mode/2up>

² *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* by Mary Shelley, 1818, pg. 49 - 50

<https://archive.org/stream/Frankenstein1818Edition/frank-a5#page/n57/mode/2up>

Preach and i talk about horror movies, my late uncle Kent loved horror and sci-fi movies too. this is one of the things we all share in common, we lean towards the movies with practical effects, strange and imaginative prosthetics, miniatures and models with fully articulated armatures, the kind of stuff done in camera and exposed onto film, real fake blood, sometimes by the bucket full, real guts, the walking talking muscular skeleton of *Hellraiser* (1987). a full body prosthetic, the fantastical death sequences in *Dream Warriors* (1987). the metaphors embedded in *King Kong* (1933). we talk on the phone about this, we talk about things inside of us. the external and internal forces pushing and pulling our own bodies, a joke about a wiretap, all in good fun but extremely serious at times, mental health exercise. life affirming, vital to survival.

4 hour phone calls begin to feel like the movies, a sequence where reality and fantasy take turns, it becomes hard to tell if what we are talking about is really real, conversation

topics mirror scenes in actual horror film at times, i drift out of consciousness, individual mind body state, i think about the time that Preach told me about one of his public talks, how he said that one of the key differences in our street actions is that at the end of it i can take my mask off. this is a privilege that i have, i think about an old New York anti-mask law from 1845, "to suppress armed uprisings by tenant farmers in the Hudson Valley who were using disguises to attack law enforcement officers." 3 this same law was used to make mass arrests during OWS and is still being used by law enforcement today, other states have similar legislation, free speech suppression, you do not need a mask to be a monster.

New York Penal Law § 240.35(4) - Loitering

4. Being masked or in any manner disguised by unusual or unnatural attire or facial alteration, loiters, remains or congregates in a public place with other persons so masked or disguised, or knowingly permits or aids persons so masked or disguised to congregate in a public place; except that such conduct is not unlawful when it occurs in connection with a masquerade party or like entertainment if, when such entertainment is held in a city which has promulgated regulations in connection with such affairs, permission is first obtained from the police or other appropriate authorities;

3 New York's Anti-Mask Law And Civil Unrest by Herb Hallas, 2013

<https://www.adirondackalmanack.com/2013/10/new-yorks-anti-mask-law-civil-unrest.html>

Preach and i talk about Frankenstein and this country, maybe there is a Doctor Frankenstein inside all of us. we sew together new creatures all the time, collective consciousness, molded with our minds, the fear of the unknown, worst case scenarios,

celebrity culture, unobtainable wealth and fame, exploitive production, the apparatus of society, a host for capitalism, fucked up, volatile relationships within ourselves and with other people, misdirected blame, personal shame, the worst kind of judgemental voyeurism, a reanimated corpse, shocked back to life over and over again.

like a surgeon with a scalpel, Preach slices a clip of Doctor Frankenstein raising his creation from the dead, the clip is implanted into the anatomy of a digital video file containing body camera footage of Preach putting a roll of shiny new pennies into his mouth and coughing them back up. Kool-Aid™⁴ blood spitting onto the pavement below as the monster's castle looms overhead, i am kneeling against the sidewalk wearing all black, the dog mask, rubber gloves, boots, stockings, long skirt, and oversized leather jacket, i am capturing a wider angle of the operation, i steady my hand against my knee as i clamp the artery to attempt to slow the bleeding. Preach tells the police (who rush over afterwards) that the gory scene was a sudden and violent allergic reaction to money.

4 Kool-Aid was invented by Edwin Perkins in Hastings, Nebraska, 1927

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kool-Aid>

It was 2013 when Aaron Swartz died. I had been in New York for about a month. When I started my archive.org account, I did not really know about Aaron Swartz. I kept contributing uploads to archive.org after I read Swartz' *Guerilla Open Access Manifesto*. The opening reads as follows, "Information is power. But like all power, there are those who want to keep it for themselves. The world's entire scientific and cultural heritage, published over centuries in books and journals, is increasingly being digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations."

I believe like Aaron that information is power. The overwhelming growth of surveillance and censorship on a global scale creates physical and digital borders where access is restricted and monitored. As an archivist, it is my duty to grant access to those who need it the most. A platform needs to be provided to those whose voices are in the margins because of the suppression tactics of the status quo. I do not believe that archive.org is a perfect platform, and I know this because just this year I had a video of mine censored by the site.

Jul 18, 2018, 10:38 AM

Subject: explanation of upload removal

hello archive.org,

i am looking for an explanation as to why the following upload was removed:

<https://archive.org/details/primerealestateforwojnarowicz>

to my knowledge i did not violate any of the terms of service. i believe this upload has been wrongfully removed as censorship until another explanation can be provided.

please reinstate this upload ASAP.

david ian bellows/griess

archive.org member since 2012

This particular upload was later reinstated without reply or explanation. However, it is odd that before this time, I had never encountered any such problem over content. I have had a few issues with needing to change identifiers, but I was almost always able to get a quick response once I posted in the community video or text forum on archive.org.

Social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Oculus Rift, and Tumblr Yahoo! use the word “community” a lot when advertising to users and as a way to justify content restrictions. The word community becomes justification for censorship and surveillance tactics. A massive wave of censorship is currently rippling through the internet, social media, and our society at large. I am talking specifically how corporations who own these creative content producing platforms are defining “adult content” (this includes terms like “female presenting nipple”). Computer based, people programmed, algorithms are being aggressively used to delete content across platforms like the ones I have mentioned above. In some cases, real outsourced labor is used to identify content that falls outside of community guidelines and are instructed to manually delete it.

I agree that some content is inappropriate, but all of sexuality should not be punished. If these platforms were really communities as these corporations say, then shouldn't the community get to decide what types of content is appropriate? The online platform Tumblr was bought by Yahoo! in 2016. When they purchased the company Yahoo! claimed it would not make any changes to the content it allowed. Now they are placing a complete ban on “adult content” as stated above. So all of the content that falls under their algorithm ban will be removed, such action affects the actual digital community in a real life way.

I used Tumblr in the way that a lot of other creative people did. To explore what I made while engaging with others by sharing ideas and information in sometimes vulnerable ways. I began to confront my gender dysphoria there. Erasure happens when people with power fear that the dominant narrative is being challenged in a way that some amount of power might be conceded.

An archive has the ability to overwrite the dominant narrative. An archive has the ability to give people access to ideas outside of a suppressed framework that has been put in place to keep the status quo. To have empathy is a small step in the long process of reconnecting with ourselves. Home movies or home recordings (if you were able to have them as a child) can be wonderful and nostalgic snippets of memories but can also contain a lot of grief, as well as many other emotions. When something becomes fragmented, it does not necessarily need to be put back together in the exact same way that it was taken apart. In fact, I would say that with the help of a self-defining, intentional community that something much more compassionate can form.

So, do I just disconnect from the internet and stay indoors? No, because in some ways that would be the most effective way to stop the free spread of creative ideas and information. This ultimately goes back to privilege. Who owns the information and how are they using it? What are the backgrounds of the people who have access to information? What are their similarities and what are their differences?

Uploaded by [david ian bellows/griess](#) on June 13, 2018

[surveillance06](#)

moon field

when competition ends - artificial and natural light beam onto a shiny black outfit - chain link fence defines the perceived boundaries - a stroll through the dirt / time to reflect - listen to the vast sky - pan the surface - zoom into the dugout - arms behind the back resisting submission - crouching and pausing - camera captures fragments as they unfold

I think Vern wanted his VHS tapes to be seen because he enjoyed showing them to people. When I was a child he would record cartoons and shows for me to watch when I visited his house. He died prior to the inception of a public internet, but I would like to think he would also be uploading content to the internet.

In order to understand the complexities of our existence, the task of archiving needs to be inclusive. It is inevitable that no archive can ever be entirely complete, but there should not be premeditated erasure. For me, the interest in archiving is not merely to gather information or to catalog it within the the walls of a private institution. I have been working for six years to generate an archive that can be sent into the world -- with the goal to create something that can be freely seen in an undeniable way.

Whether it is telling my story or helping a friend or stranger tell theirs, I see my role as being enmeshed within the struggle for free exchange of information and ideas. I believe I would be better off emotionally and physically in a space that empowers me to empower others. A fragmented archive is not an archive with missing pieces. A fragmented archive is a way to visually understand a complex set of numerous entangled connections and what it could mean to play a small part of a larger whole.

I believe in a world rooted within the practice of archiving. To record and review creative self-expression, something that can be an extremely empowering and humbling experience. To be witnessed and be a witness with empathy. To share our personal stories with each other without the threat of violence or imprisonment. Each shared archive has the ability to become a resource and generate conversations that have the potential to aid in reckoning with past and present injustices of the world.